

## THE TRANSLATOR AS AGENT OF CULTURAL DIFFUSION: THE CASE OF CHINUA ACHEBE IN *THINGS FALL APART*

### Abstract

*The socio-cultural norms and values of any given society are reflected in their proverbs, idioms, etc. Any translation of such sayings which does not reflect the original concept of such sayings is to say the least not fulfilling one of the most important functions of translation. It is clear from the above that the production of an acceptable, natural translation is an arduous task, especially if the original piece is good literature. This is precisely because such a piece is usually produced from an intimate and effective exploitation of the comprehensive, idiomatic potentialities and peculiar socio-cultural background of the source language. Thus, for its translation to be natural, the translator must aim at a relatively equivalent standard in the receptor language. It is against this background that this paper examines the artistic manner with which Igbo proverbs, witty sayings and expressions are aptly translated into the English language by Chinua Achebe in his novel: Things Fall Apart. The paper concludes that by doing this, Achebe successfully, through translation, exposed to the non-Igbo readers the socio-cultural traits of the Igbo people.*

### 1. Introduction

Very often, literary critics concentrate their criticism on the content and the style adopted by individual novelists to the exclusion of other artistic elements inherent in creative literary works. Such critics focus attention on the expertise of the artist in handling his subject matter, his linguistic competence and style and some other elements which they think necessary in the evaluation of a literary work. The result is that such critical analysis have more often than not become stereotype in form and content.

Usually certain artistic features of the African writer have been neglected as being either not necessary or of secondary importance. When we talk of aesthetics in terms of literary works, all factors contributing to the novelists's artistic success should be brought into full glare. By so doing we come to appreciate the genius behind the desk.

Chinua Achebe, one of the prolific African novelists of our time has been under focus for nearly five decades now. Literary critics such as Umezina (1980), Wren (1980), Irele (1979), Griffiths (1982), Killam (1969), and Shelton (1964) to mention but a few have written extensively on the different aspects of Achebe's novels. These critics, as observed earlier, often base their analysis on the thematic as well as the contextual factors. None of them has thought it necessary to examine Chinua Achebe's contribution in the area of translation.

It is therefore the purpose of this paper to bring into focus what I consider to be a very important aspect in Chinua Achebe's works which has hitherto been neglected by critics. I am concerned here with Achebe's artistic method of handling the translation of Igbo idioms, proverbs and axioms in *Things Fall Apart* into English and how in effect this has contributed in no small measure to the diffusion of Igbo and indeed African culture to different parts of the globe.

## 2. The African Literary Artist as a Translator

In the first place, it must be stressed that an African literary artist writing in English, French or any other Indo-European language is not merely another novelist but a translator also. After all, the African writer has the arduous duty of translating African concepts, thoughts and beliefs into the target language. How he achieves his aim, which is to put across to the outside world the socio-cultural values of his people, depends to a large extent on how he marries his native thought with the foreign language. How does he handle the translation of his intricate local proverbs and idiomatic expressions? To what extent does he succeed in conveying vividly through apt translation their ethos to his readers? It is here that the competence of the artist is tested.

Hartmann and Stork (1974) have defined translation as the process or result of converting information from one language or language variety into another. Though this definition is an over simplification of the question, it still serves the limited purpose of this paper. The aim of translation is to produce as accurately as possible all grammatical as well as lexical categories of the source language in the

target language. Also necessary is the need to retain all factual information contained in the original idea or text.

The reference to translation as a complex exercise in culture, training in the manipulation of language skills, immediately focuses attention on the translator himself. As such, his role is critical and generally recognized by linguists and authorities in the arts and social sciences. So vital is the translator's personality that Nida (1964:145) sees no possibility of discussing any translating principles and procedures without first of all determining his function.

Since the translator himself is the focal element of translating ... since he is a part of the cultural context in which he lives, his role is central to the basic principles and procedures of translating.

This truism underlines the subtle exaltation of the translator by Walter Benjamin (1975:224). In his view, the translator is "one who elicits, who conjures up by virtue of unplanned echo a language nearer to primal unity of speech than is either the original text or tongue into which he is translating". Continuing, he sees the translator as the courier of the human spirit.

Implicit in these references is the importance of ensuring that the translator is properly groomed for his job. He should not only be well grounded in the relevant languages but also be fully aware of his own role. That is, he must know the nature of his function, if he is to produce an authentic translation.

## 3. Achebe as Translator Cum Cultural Diffusionist

It is in the light of the above that we will examine Achebe's role as a novelist/translator in *Things Fall Apart*. For instance, his substitution of 'moon' for month conveys in a subtle manner the concept of the lunar month among the Igbo. Thus as the author describes Okonkwo's father, he mentions among other things the fact that Unoka "was very good on his flute and his happiest moments were the two or three 'moons' after the harvest when the village musicians brought down their instruments, hung above the fire place" p.4.

The Igbo system of reckoning time, especially the calendar year is based on the phases of the moon. The counting begins with the sighting of the first moon after yams have been planted and continues until twelve moons are counted. This is the Igbo calendar year. This cultural peculiarity is conveyed to the reader by the seemingly careless but subtle translation of the Igbo word *onwa* as moon instead of as month. As the author talks about the task involved in yam cultivation he says "For three or four 'moons' it demanded hard work and constant attention..." (p.31). Again talking about how Okonkwo then spent his evening in his obi with Nwoye and Ikemefuna the author writes:

In this way the moons and seasons passed p.49.

A tactless translator would have rendered the word *onwa* as month to reflect the English concept. But by translating *onwa* as moon following the local usage among the Igbo, the novelist/translator conveys to his non-Igbo speaking audience the lunar basis of the Igbo concept of time.

In pursuance of his goal as an agent of cultural diffusion Achebe renders certain Igbo sayings word-for-word in English. For example, on one occasion when Unoka offers kolanut (a symbol of goodwill) to his visitor and creditor, Okoye, he announces the arrival of the kolanut in the following words: "I have kola" and his visitor thanked him by saying:

He who brings kola brings life. P.5

This translation matches almost word for word with the original Igbo saying from which it is framed.

He	who	brings	kola	brings	life	(English)
↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓
Onye	∅	wetere	oju!	wetere	ndu	(Igbo)

From the above schemata it can be seen that the author achieves his objective by using word-for-word translation. Every word in the English version except the relative pronoun 'who' which does not exist in Igbo has its equivalent in the Igbo original. In ordinary circumstances, this translation would have been condemned as being too literal. However, in the present situation it has been deliberately used to create an effect, to portray without mincing words the importance which the

Igbo place on kolanuts. The kola is here referred to as life itself, hence whoever brings it brings life.

Equally significant in translation is the cultural framework in which the process of transfer operates. There are cultural differences between societies separated in time as well as between contemporary societies. This calls for an appreciation of the contemporary cultural relevance of expressions, their historical background and traditional usage. A good translation should reflect these differences allowing of course, for the inescapable fact that the translator, in interpreting one culture into another, cannot avoid being influenced, to some extent, by his own cultural context. Stressing this point further, a well-known translator, Lattimore, R. (1959:48-56) asserts: "No translator can escape being colored by his own time, and it is wrong to try too hard to cut free from this influence. One cannot translate in a vacuum". Suffice it to stress the fundamental fact that the translator should have as much knowledge of the cultures of both languages as to enable him understand not only the obvious content of his text but also the nuances and subtleties of meaning, the significant emotive values of words and the stylistic features which determine the flavour and feel of its message. "A good translation" says Forster, (1958:6) "is one which fulfils the same purpose in the new language as the original did in the language in which it was written".

Chinua Achebe's craftsmanship can be seen in the way he uses artistic techniques in translation to reflect the cultural traits of the Igbo and by so doing brings to light these cultural traits to the door steps of his foreign readers. Having a good knowledge of the cultures of both the English and the Igbo, he is able to handle his subject matter in such a way that the resources of both languages are exploited much more judiciously and systematically.

What is being stressed here is that it takes the artistic mind of a novelist like Chinua Achebe to be able to diffuse the culture and belief of a particular people by way of translation. Translation, which aims at giving a reader in the target language just that which he is familiar with is not good enough. Translating a saying from the source language into a

target language should aim at stimulating the curiosity of the readers. The translator should inspire in his audience a spirit of inquiry into what type of culture the people who possess certain striking and peculiar sayings have.

For example, in the hand of a less competent translator, the Igbo adage on page 17 of *Things Fall Apart* would have been rendered as "Live and let live". Every English speaker is accustomed to this proverb and knows under what context it could be used. But in the hands of a purposeful artist like Achebe, he translates it almost word-for-word as the Igbo would say it, thereby portraying the ethos of the people which is quite akin to the Mosaic law, "A tooth for a tooth an eye for an eye". Hence he translates the Igbo proverb: *Egbe bere Ugo bere nke si ibe ya ebela nku kwaa ya*, as "Let the kite perch and let the egret perch too; if one says no to the other, let his wings break" p.10.

The above rendering even though it means "Live and let live", adds a peculiar dimension by the manner it is expressed, thus any one who says that his fellow man should not live, should die instantly. Igbo norms and values condemn extreme selfishness and overbearing individualism. Those who are guilty of these are not worthy to live and should die off. From Chinua Achebe's translation of the above proverb the foreign reader becomes aware that for the traditional Igbo, the Christian teaching that "you should wish well anybody who wishes you evil", does not hold water. Therefore translating the saying as merely "Live and let live" would not bring out this peculiar cultural trait of the Igbo people.

On several occasions in the novel, the author translates Igbo sayings and beliefs in such a way that no doubt is left in the minds of the readers as to whose culture he is depicting. And for those who are not conversant with the Igbo way of life, there will be the eagerness to ask questions about the culture of the people. The Igbo belief in the possession of personal gods is portrayed in the manner Achebe retains the word "Chi", which he could have easily translated as "destiny".

On one occasion, while trying to refute an old man's assertion that Okonkwo's palm kernels "had been cracked for him by a benevolent spirit", he maintains that the most one could say about Okonkwo was that his *Chi* or "personal god" was good. However, he sees Okonkwo's success as a case to buttress the Igbo proverb which says "... when a man says yes his *chi* says yes also". Okonkwo said yes very strongly; so his *chi* agreed p.25. This saying could have been translated simply as "Heaven helps those who help themselves". But Achebe, for purely aesthetic reasons refuses to adopt the hackneyed saying.

In another occasion, a woman (Chielo) who stood shoulder to shoulder with Okonkwo's second wife (Ekwefi) during one of the wrestling bouts, asked Ekwefi whether it was true that her husband, Okonkwo, nearly killed her with a gun, Ekwefi answered in the affirmative and Chielo retorted "Your *chi* is awake", p.25. The author could have translated the saying merely as "You are lucky". But the question is, if he had employed the later form of translation, could it have brought out vividly the concept of *chi* among the Igbo? Of course it would not. This is because the saying "You are lucky" is so common place that it cannot be ascribed to a particular people.

To know how a people view the world around them is to understand how they evaluate life. *Chi* is a dominant principal category of the understanding among the Igbo. The ideas, assumptions, beliefs and actions relating to this metaphysical conception points to its centrality in Igbo world-view. And a good translator must accord it its rightful place when rendering an Igbo literary piece in any other language. It is not easy to give a straight forward, simple translation of *chi*; there are several dimensions to the Igboman's use of the concept. For example, *chi* is personal to each individual. Therefore writers, who translate it as "personal god", "guardian spirit" and other accurate synonyms in English thought are basically right. But no single adequate translation of the word could perfectly portray its diverse use among the Igbo.

One who fortunately gets a good *chi* is usually 'lucky' and 'successful' in one's earthly ventures; one is not prone to serious,

irreversibly damaging fortunes and accidents. The opposite goes for a bad *chi*. It is in this context that *chi* is used in *Things Fall Apart*. It can be seen that no single English word or phrase could aptly translate it in the context it is used in the novel, and to paraphrase it would be cumbersome in a creative literary work.

For the message or information to be accurately and faithfully communicated, there is no substitute for thorough mastery of the culture of not only the target language but also of the source language. Without this, the translator's rendering would be neither convincing nor effective. Achebe translates Igbo axioms and sayings as one versed in the culture of his people and by so doing he makes his work a mirror through which the Igbo culture could be viewed.

Among the Igbo, it is not customary for young children to dine from the same place with adults. This is because the dusty nature of the tropics, leaves children filthy and dirty after a playing session and no adult would like to eat with them unless they wash themselves clean. Thus stating the fact that Okonkwo was still young but had won fame as the greatest wrestler; had become a wealthy farmer; had already married three wives and taken two titles, the author describes him as one of the greatest men of his time, his age notwithstanding. He continues by saying that age was respected among Okonkwo's people, but that achievement was revered. Hence the elders said "if a child washed his hands he could eat with kings" (p.8). Okonkwo who in this case is the child that has washed his hands, eats with elders. To render the above adage into English, many a translator would have said: "if one achieves fame and wealth in society, one would be accepted by the people". But this kind of translation portrays nothing about the culture of the people who use the proverb.

The same thing goes for the translation of the Igbo proverb: *Onwa gbawa ije aguwa onye ngworo*, which Achebe renders aptly as "When the moon is shining, the cripple becomes hungry for a walk" p.10. This saying, features as the author talks about the joy children derive from moonlight plays and the fact that their happy voices remind old men and women of their youth. Translating this saying in another

way apart from how it is rendered here will in no way suggest to the outside world the importance the Igbo attach to moonlight walks and plays so much so that the old usually become nostalgic about them. First of all, in order to appreciate the glamour of the moonlight there must be no other artificial light out-shining it. Therefore a community that is very appreciative of the moonlight definitely does not have electricity.

During the conversation that ensues as Okonkwo is in Nwakibe's house, another man, Ogbuefi Idigo talks about the wine tapper, Obiako, who suddenly gives up his trade. Suggesting a reason for Obiako's action one of the men present, Akualia retorts: *A toad does not run in the daytime for nothing* p.19. What this proverb means in effect is "Nothing happens for nothing", if the aim of the translator is just to find its English equivalent. But the above translation, even though it is used by the English themselves, reveals nothing about the environment of the people, who own the proverb. Achebe's rendering, on the other hand, gives a clue to the nature of the tropical environment (of the Igbo) where the forests are inhabited by reptiles and amphibians.

To portray the fact that one of the hobbies of the Igbo is hunting, Achebe translates an Igbo saying about hunters and their prey exactly as the Igbo would use it. In reply to Okonkwo's request for yam seedlings, Nwakibe tells him why he (Nwakibe) had in the past refused to donate yam seedlings to many young men who had come to him for them. He feared that if he gave them the seedlings they would just dump them in the earth, leaving them to be choked up by weeds. He further adds the saying: *Eneke the bird says that since men have learnt to shoot without missing, he has learnt to fly without perching*, p.20. The English equivalent of this saying could be "Once beaten twice shy".

There are other Igbo sayings which had been revealed by Achebe. They are often rendered in a way to help define the culture of the people. "Still water that runs deep" is rendered as "Dry-meat-that-fills the-mouth" as the Igbo would say it. This is used during the settlement of the case between Uzowulu on the one hand and his wife Mgbafo and her brothers on the other. The Egwugwu masquerade called Evil Forest, addressing Uzowulu, says amongst other things: *I kill a man*

on the day that his life is sweetest to him: (I am) Dry-meat-that-fills-the-mouth, p.85. Dry meat is usually shrunken and tough. Its size is small compared with its weight. When it is being chewed, it becomes moist and expands, thus filling the mouth. Rendering the saying *Anụ kpọrọ nkụ na-eju ọnu* (Dry meat that fills the mouth) in another way will not bring out this concept of being small but mighty as the Igbo use it.

#### 4. Conclusion

The socio-cultural norms and values of any given society are reflected in their proverbs, idioms etc. Any translation of such sayings which does not reflect the original concept of such sayings is to say the least not fulfilling one of the most important functions of translation. It is clear from the above that the production of an acceptable natural translation is an arduous task, especially if the original piece is good literature. This is precisely because such a piece is usually produced from an intimate and effective exploitation of the comprehensive, idiomatic potentialities and peculiar socio-cultural background of the source language. Thus, for its translation to be natural, the translator must aim at a relatively equivalent standard in the receptor language. If these phenomena are adhered to, the translator would not only fulfill the task of converting information from one language to another but would be diffusing the cultural traits of the owners of the source language to different parts of the globe where the target language is spoken. This is exactly what Chinua Achebe does in his translation of Igbo sayings into English in *Things Fall Apart*.

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